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The Method Behind the Madness: Katie Mitchell, Stanislavski, and the Classics

Abstract

Scholars frequently debate the applicability of contemporary theatre theories and acting techniques to Greek tragedy. Evidence both for and against such usage, however, is usually drawn from textual analyses which attempt to find support for these readings within the plays. Such arguments neglect the performative dimension of these theories. This article demonstrates an alternative approach by considering a case study of a Stanislavskian-inspired production of a Greek tragedy.

Taking Katie Mitchell's 2007 Royal National Theatre production *Women of Troy* as a paradigmatic example, the article explores the application of a Stanislavskian approach to Euripides' *Troades*. I argue that Mitchell's production indicates that modern theatre techniques can not only transform Greek tragedy into lucid productions of contemporary relevance, but can also supplement the scholarly analysis of the plays. **The Stanislavskian acting techniques are seen to work like a domesticating translation, recreating themes and emotions from the extant tragedy in a powerful way that enhances the performative dimensions of the play and counters the idea of a fixed Euripidean meaning. The article concludes that a performative methodology is essential for reception scholars and performance historians who debate the applicability of a Stanislavskian approach to Greek tragedy.**

Psychological realism is a foundational element in almost all current naturalistic productions that seek to tell a story and evoke a response through linear, character-driven narrative. Audiences consequently often expect actors to perform an embodied representation of the psychological complexities of the characters and story being staged. Despite this, scholars frequently argue against the application of contemporary acting techniques to Greek tragedy.¹ They also contest the notion that the characters portrayed in the extant texts are formulated in a way that invites such psychological exploration;² Pat Easterling, for example, has stated that ‘No one any longer asks the equivalent, in relation to Greek tragedy, of the question ‘How many children had Lady Macbeth?’, naïvely supposing that the stage figures can be studied as if they were beings with a continuing off-stage existence’.³ Such arguments are usually based upon evidence drawn from textual analyses of the ancient plays or a consideration of the original performance contexts. They downplay the extent to which theatre practitioners continue to ask such questions of Greek tragedy. In this article I explore this phenomenon, and argue that a performative methodology, which considers the processes that these practitioners undertake and their resulting performances, offers a new perspective on these debates and is an approach of particular interest to reception scholars and performance historians.

This article takes Katie Mitchell’s 2007 Royal National Theatre (RNT) production⁴ of Euripides’ *Troades*⁵ as a paradigmatic example to consider the way

¹ Lada (1993) and Lada-Richards (1997) are exceptions to this, and are particularly illuminating as to how modern theories of performance—particularly Brechtian and Stanislavskian—can shed light on the staging and audience reception of drama in antiquity.

² For scholarship arguing in support of the application of psychological realism to Greek tragedy, see Lada-Richards (2002: 403-4), and Lada-Richards (2005). For scholarship arguing against this see Wiles (2000: 185). For scholarship that more broadly argues in favour of Greek tragedy evincing modern psychology, see Diggle (1999: 296), as opposed to Goldhill (2007: 81, 111).

³ Easterling (1990: 83).

⁴ Mitchell is an enormously important practitioner for scholars of classical performance reception. She has, to date, directed six productions of Greek tragedy. Her RNT production of *Women of Troy* used Don Taylor’s translation and ran from 28 November 2007 to 27 February 2008 in the Lyttelton Theatre. Rehearsals began on 24 September 2007 in the National Theatre Studios, London. The translation can be found in Taylor (2007).

psychological realism can affect the interpretation and communication of an ancient play. Mitchell's directorial approach is explicitly based upon the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski, and as such this article explores the specific impact of a contemporary interpretation of a Stanislavskian approach involving psychological realism. It works with full knowledge that Mitchell's style is not representative of all interpretations that exist under the rubric of psychological realism.⁶ My discussion begins with an introduction to Mitchell's unique Stanislavskian approach, and the ways in which this contrasts with current scholarly views about Greek tragedy. In order to explore the practical effects of Mitchell's method, I then conduct a semiotics-based performance analysis of three scenes in her production, and the creative processes underlying them.⁷ These include the opening scene, one central scene, and the denouement.⁸ This methodology allows the individual signifiers of performance, including elements of the *mise-en-scène*, text, and performance segmentation, to be compounded in order to reveal the potential meanings offered to an audience.⁹ By comparing *Women of Troy* with the text of *Troades* and other performance receptions of the play, I demonstrate how Mitchell's direction ultimately transformed Euripides' script into a new play of explicit contemporary relevance. My approach reveals that a performative methodology can help one to understand ancient tragedies as performance texts, and indicates that scholars should consider such works in tandem

⁵ To avoid confusion I use the title *Troades* when referring to Euripides' script and, in keeping with its original title, *Women of Troy* when referring to Mitchell's 2007 production. When I refer to any other production, this is clearly stated.

⁶ I have chosen to transliterate Konstantin Stanislavski with an initial K, and -ski ending, rather than the more widespread initial C and -sky ending, as this is the transliteration used by Mitchell's preferred translator, Jean Benedetti.

⁷ The rehearsal period and creative process can provide scholars with as much material for analysis as the performance itself. For an example of how informative these processes can be as to practitioners' interpretations, see Taplin (2001).

⁸ Space does not permit either an examination of the entire production or full textual study of the scenes under consideration. For scholarship on the opening of *Tr.*, see Dunn (1993). For scholarship on Cassandra's scene, see Papadopoulou (2000) and Rutherford (2001). For scholarship on the denouement of *Tr.*, see Dunn (1996).

⁹ The schemas of Patrice Pavis and Gay McAuley influence this analytic approach. See Pavis (1996) and McAuley (1998, esp. 4-5).

with other forms of analysis when making claims about character, and the applicability of psychological realism, in Greek tragedy.¹⁰

Mitchell is renowned for her Stanislavskian-based approach and has been actively developing it since she studied directing in Russia, Poland, Georgia, and Lithuania during her 1989 Churchill Fellowship.¹¹ Her experiences observing Lev Dodin and Tadeusz Kantor during this time, and later studying under Tatiana Olear and Elen Bowman¹²—both of whom trace a direct line of tuition descending from Stanislavski to themselves and are third generation students of his methods—have made Mitchell an unfailing proponent of his system, believing that ‘His [Stanislavski’s] work remains relevant whenever you find yourself directing a play that contains characters who are members of the human race, regardless of the time period they inhabit or the style of the play they belong to’.¹³ This contrasts explicitly with prevailing academic ideas about character and psychology in ancient drama. Simon Goldhill, for example, cautions against applying psychological realism to Greek tragedy, warning that ‘Searching for motivation or character development through modern psychological expectations can prove a frustrating effort’ as ‘Character may not be formed according to modern psychological lines’.¹⁴ The precise degree of character development, and particularly emotional and psychological depth, in tragedy is contentious, with academic views varying from Gould’s perspective that Aeschylus’ portrayal of Clytemnestra, for example, does not require or even allow us to probe her psychology,¹⁵ to Budelmann and Easterling’s recent argument that there are textual clues which encourage the audience to read character and psychology into the drama, ‘[p]rompting spectators at the same time to

¹⁰ For recent scholarship on characterization in Greek tragedy, see Easterling (1990), Goldhill (1990), Griffin (1990), and Budelmann and Easterling (2010).

¹¹ See Rebellato (2010: 320).

¹² Mitchell (2009: 230).

¹³ Ibid. 227.

¹⁴ Goldhill (2007: 81, 111).

¹⁵ Gould (1978: 59-60).

read the feelings, thoughts, or intentions of the *dramatis personae* and to reflect upon the successes and shortcomings of the mind-reading process'.¹⁶ Any debate about such matters, however, is moot for practitioners such as Mitchell, who believe that the textual evidence is sufficient for performers to unearth characters with individual identities and ascertainable psychologies.

Although this core belief is rooted in a Stanislavskian approach, Mitchell's overall style represents a unique adaptation of Stanislavskian ideas about psychological realism. This is not unusual as there is no one Stanislavskian system. There are many divergent strands to Stanislavski's theories for interpreting and staging a play, such as the distinction between the American Method approach, which is most commonly attributed to Lee Strasberg and associated with the Actors Studio in New York City, and the more Continental Stanislavskian system. The former is often associated with using personal experiences and memories to bring an emotional truth to character and requires total immersion in the world of the play, while the latter usually combines emotional memory with a method of physical action that focuses on bodily rhythms as a trigger for emotion.¹⁷ These differences emerged as Stanislavski constantly evolved his theories throughout his lifetime, and were exacerbated by his reluctance to publish his work. This consequently resulted in his students orally transmitting his ideas as they developed.¹⁸ In all basic forms, however, a Stanislavskian approach dictates that believable performances require psychological accuracy, meaning actors must understand the psychological motivations and backstory of both the entire narrative and their individual characters, and perform an embodied and accurate representation of this. Mitchell assisted her actors in achieving such accuracy by employing three primary techniques: creating an extensive backstory for the production; constructing detailed psychological profiles for each

¹⁶ Budelmann and Easterling (2010: 292).

¹⁷ See Benedetti (2008) for an introduction to Stanislavski's theories encompassing these divergences.

¹⁸ See Pitches (2006: 5).

character; and rehearsing the play with a focus on the biology of emotions,¹⁹ all of which I will now discuss in depth in order to contextualize my upcoming performance analysis.

Mitchell assisted her actors in creating a psychologically realistic backstory by completing extensive research and writing exhaustive timelines for each character and event in the play.²⁰ The detailed backstory Mitchell developed during rehearsals included positioning the drama temporally in November 2050 AD, exactly sixteen hours after the sack of Troy, and occurring (following an Aristotelian timespan) from dawn until nightfall. Individual timelines reveal Mitchell also invented a chronology of royal events, beginning with the marriage of Priam and Hecuba in 2016 and ending with the marriage of Deiphobus and Helen in 2050, as well as a Trojan War chronology from the ‘abduction’ (Mitchell’s word) of Helen in the summer of 2037, through to an hour-by-hour analysis of events from the moment the Trojan horse entered the city up to the present moment of the play; the stage manager’s running list even records that the actors were informed every night that ‘the time in Troy is 03:44am’ before the curtain went up. These exceptionally detailed timelines demonstrate how paramount it was for Mitchell to portray a realistic situation, and the personal information included, such as births, deaths, and marriages, proves that practitioners do indeed contemplate the biographies of their characters.

In order to ensure that the actors understood the psychological motivations of their characters, as well as their personal backstory and that of the play, Mitchell met with a psychologist during the rehearsal period and developed profiles for each character. The psychologist noted, amongst other things, that: Cassandra might be manic-depressive, as some sufferers believe they can predict the future; Hecuba must

¹⁹ This, and all subsequent information about Mitchell’s pre-production and rehearsal period, is based upon original archival research conducted in the RNT archives.

²⁰ This research was on: Greek geography; soldier numbers in ancient hand-to-hand conflict; and the fates of contemporary prisoners of war.

have had post-natal depression to have given up Paris earlier in the myth cycle;²¹ and the chorus might display symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder triggered by the immediate circumstances of the play. Tendencies the psychologist ascribed to these conditions featured in Mitchell's production, such as the diagnosis of mania including 'Singing, undressing, spending money, delusions, nightmares, avoidance behaviour, restlessness, can't work, no-relationships'.²² Mitchell assisted her actors in realizing these psychological profiles by working with them to portray such states with an accurate biology of emotions.

This work on the biology of emotions is a furthering of Stanislavski's investigations into the physiological and emotional elements of performance, and particularly his reading of William James' essay 'What is an Emotion' on cognitive science and physiology.²³ In this essay James argues that humans react physically before consciously experiencing emotion.²⁴ He uses the example of a human encountering a bear, and asserts that a person in this situation immediately turns and runs while only later experiencing the emotion of fear. Mitchell received a 2001-4 fellowship from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts to research these emotional and physiological elements of Stanislavski's teaching;²⁵ this included tutoring from neuroscientist Mark Lythgoe. Together Mitchell and Lythgoe studied the work of Antonio Damasio who, supported scientifically by brain-imaging techniques, builds upon James' essay to argue that the gap between stimulus and emotional response is a half-second, and that during this half-second, before we are

²¹ This event was depicted in Euripides' *Alexandros*, an earlier play in the same trilogy as *Tr*.

²² See also Higgins (2007). My upcoming performance analysis reveals Sinead Matthews' portrayal of Cassandra included many of these tendencies.

²³ Mitchell (2009: 231).

²⁴ James (1884).

²⁵ Shevtsova and Innes (2009: 189).

conscious of emotion, there are legible physical changes.²⁶ This information directly influenced the representation of emotion and character in *Women of Troy*.

The writings of James and Damasio pushed Mitchell to work on emotions in rehearsal by recreating the physical response they invoke in the body. Mitchell now simultaneously works inside-out, by asking her actors **to invoke internally** an emotional or psychological state, and outside-in, by replicating the physiological manifestation of emotions as based upon James and Damasio's theories of emotional biology.²⁷ Although the latter technique may not be considered strictly Stanislavskian, Shevtsova and Innes convincingly argue it is a furthering of Stanislavski's attempt to use physiology to find the corporeal impulses and manifestations of emotions,²⁸ differing from Stanislavski's teachings only because of the aid of modern science. Furthermore, Blair, when speaking broadly about incorporating cognitive neuroscience into actor training, argues that such techniques result in '[a]n interpenetration of physiological and psychological factors going beyond the level or kind described by Stanislavsky, Strasberg, and others but which is certainly continuing in the direction implied by their systems'.²⁹ Mitchell's approach is unique in contemporary theatre and stands in opposition to other popular styles of acting, which 'edit out' these half-second gaps and privilege things such as diction over what Mitchell deems accurate representations of human behaviour.³⁰

Mitchell utilized a number of rehearsal exercises to apply these innovative acting techniques to *Women of Troy*. For example, she directed her cast through 'slice

²⁶ See Damasio (2000).

²⁷ For further discussion on this matter see Shevtsova (2006:10-11). Mitchell records the specific rehearsal techniques she employs to achieve this in her discussion of the 2004 *IA* rehearsals in her book on directing. See Mitchell (2009, esp: 154-156).

²⁸ Shevtsova and Innes (2009: 180).

²⁹ Blair (2006: 175).

³⁰ Mitchell argues that acting styles which preserve these gaps result in performances where audiences are unable **to read visually**, and consequently react to, what is happening on stage. For further discussion on this see Shevtsova and Innes (2009: 188-190).

of life' exercises and assisted them in applying physical mannerisms discovered in these workshops to their characters. She describes this process as follows:

Select an idea and ask the actors to think of a moment in their lives that relates to or embodies that idea. Ask them to imagine that their life is a very long film and encourage them to present a few minutes of that film exactly as it happened, without edits or corrections. Ask the actors to recall what happened, how it happened, when it happened and where. [...] After the exercise has finished, discuss it for five minutes. First, encourage the actors to make links between what happened in the exercise and moments or characters in the play.³¹

Mitchell asked her cast to enact scenes based on primary emotions, particularly fear, and themes she associated with the text, including: war; family; power; and the collapse of moral order. They discovered that the most common physical reactions to these emotions and themes were: stillness; becoming stiff; and having an increased temperature.³² This rehearsal exercise led to Mitchell's actors embodying these characteristics throughout the production in order to create a more heightened form of theatre.³³ Mitchell additionally employed a number of devices in an attempt to make the audience experience the emotion of fear and its accompanying physical manifestations as well. For example, she attempted **to frighten** the audience through pyrotechnics. The production featured an explosion which was so realistic that the risk assessment was, literally, off the scale, and a fire fighter was present backstage every performance as a safety precaution. Mitchell hoped her use of an explosion would remind the audience of September 11 and directly forge a link between

³¹ Mitchell (2009: 151-2).

³² Stated in the *Women of Troy* Platform Paper at the RNT, 10 December 2007.

³³ Due to the way this scientific approach departs from other forms of psychological realism, Kim Solga prefers to call this a form of 'radical' naturalism, '[a] science-based method of physical action that foregrounds the visceral experience of affect rather than affect's mimesis, both for actors and for audience'. See Solga (2008: 149-150).

Euripides' play and the current Iraq war.³⁴ Interestingly, however, this was Mitchell's only explicit reference to contemporary warfare despite the fact that this link, as I will shortly demonstrate, was instrumental to her interpretation of the play. Instead of providing an explicit commentary on the situation in Iraq through the *mise-en-scène*, Mitchell attempted to make her audience focus on the interactions contained within Euripides' script and the emotional responses such situations would evoke in today's world. Her approach consequently encouraged an embodied understanding of the themes within the play.

These three primary processes added additional meanings to Euripides' text and fundamentally transformed the form and performance style of the play. Yet despite the ways in which Mitchell's method altered the extant text, it may still be possible to supplement scholarly understanding about tragedy, and the role of character within this genre, by studying such Stanislavskian-inspired performances. The commonalities between Mitchell's work and the emerging academic area which uses cognitive science to reconsider the performance context and character development in Greek tragedy, particularly in regards to emotion and physicality, testifies to this potential.³⁵ Thinking about ancient drama through a cognitive science lens is a self-consciously anachronistic methodological approach for which there are numerous potential critiques, particularly in regards to the frequent tendency for such studies to treat both ancient and modern audiences as a collective entity. The cognitive turn, however, will undoubtedly continue to permeate reception and performance studies research in the future. Despite the reluctance of some scholars to embrace the application of contemporary acting techniques to Greek tragedy,

³⁴ Mitchell states in her personal notes that 'The explosion references September 11th. The question we should ask is 'is that the attack we have been waiting for' i.e. for a second we think it's real'. Due to the 1940s style costuming and music used in the production, this could also be read as referencing the London Blitz.

³⁵ For scholarship on the former, see Meineck (2011) and Meineck (2012), and on the latter see Budelmann (2010) and Budelmann and Easterling (2010).

Mitchell's use of cognitive science as part of a Stanislavskian approach shows the relevance of these methods, and the potential such productions hold for those wishing to consider emotions in Greek tragedy through cognitive science. Taking into account the insights gained from applying cognitive science to Greek tragedy in practice, no matter how much the resulting performances depart from the text, can only help further clarify ideas gained through other forms of scholarly inquiry. My analysis of the way Mitchell's Stanislavskian approach came through in select moments from the beginning, middle, and end of her production, and the way it impacted upon her interpretation and communication of the Euripidean material, further exemplifies the benefits of this methodology.

The extent to which this approach affected Mitchell's production can be seen in the differences between the *Women of Troy* prologue and the extant text. Instead of opening with a conversation between Poseidon and Athena about the sack of Troy and the future fate of the Greeks, Mitchell instead began with Hecuba's monody.³⁶ The opening tableau preceding this visually depicted a group of eight women scattered across the stage in silhouette as the lights faded in. This revealed the setting: a cavernous space with a wooden floor, stone support beams, and corrugated iron patching covering the ground floor windows. Uncovered windows in a walled-in mezzanine revealed the shadow of another woman upstairs, pacing. Ladders against the stage left and right walls, and a service lift upstage connecting the stage to the mezzanine, implied the action was taking place in a warehouse environment and the soundscape, which incorporated ship horns and ocean noises coming from stage left, denoted that the location was a contemporary shipping port.³⁷ This implied that the

³⁶ This is common in contemporary stagings of *Tr.* and will be discussed later in this article.

³⁷ The design process also reveals the extent to which Mitchell's method permeated the production. Mitchell had her designer, Bunny Christie, visit a number of shipping ports in Scotland after she decided that a port would be the most realistic setting for the drama. These visits ensured the design, construction materials, and scale were accurate, and gave authentic solutions to dramaturgical problems such as where to position Helen during the drama. See Cavendish (2007).

women were in a liminal space, with their destroyed city stage right, and the ferries waiting to deport them stage left. The barrenness of the room revealed it to be a makeshift holding bay. In the opening moment the women fidgeted, smoked cigarettes, and re-applied their make-up, which, combined with the pacing of the woman upstairs, implied a feeling of anxiety and a sense of entrapment. The women showed signs of a recent struggle; bruises were beginning to show on their flesh and their hair was matted and disheveled. This was juxtaposed against their black tie costuming of floor-length evening gowns, high heels, and clutch purses. The costuming temporally placed the action immediately after the sack of Troy: the women had been ambushed by Greek soldiers while prematurely celebrating Troy's victory.

Mitchell's decision to begin *Women of Troy* with a shortened version of Hecuba's monody meant only a few minutes of performance elapsed before the entrance of Talthybius, who was joined by another two members of the Greek army. The relative number of Greek men to Trojan women, and their bureaucratic costuming of dark suits and clipboards, made them an imposing presence. The men proceeded **briskly to inform** Hecuba which Greek men she and her daughters had been assigned to as slaves, regularly consulting their clipboards efficiently to indicate their administrative, rather than decision-making, position within the Greek army. A fire alarm and accompanying red flashing lights interrupted this action and prompted the men to exit. Benny Goodman's *Swing Swing Swing* then suddenly began to play over a loudspeaker, and the women immediately started dancing the quickstep partner-less, facing the audience in a straight line centre stage.³⁸

These opening scenes are revelatory as to the extent to which Mitchell's method shaped her interpretation of the material and resulted in a unique production

³⁸ This dance, and indeed all the chorus work that featured in the production, was choreographed by Mitchell's movement director and long-time collaborator, Struan Leslie. For Leslie's reflection on his work in *Women of Troy*, see Leslie (2010: 417-19).

that departed from other performance receptions of *Troades*. This can be seen in the way that her ‘supertask’ and ‘throughaction’ governed the setting of the play and the emphasis placed within these scenes. Stanislavskian theory dictates that a formal analytic process must be applied to a script in order to outline the world of the play. This process involves: naming the supertask, or what the play should be about; setting tasks which instruct each actor what to do during each unit of the play; articulating actions which dictate what the actors must do to fulfill their tasks; and deciding on the throughaction of the play, which frames the tasks and actions **to relate logically** to the play’s perceived meaning.³⁹ Mitchell’s working notes reveal that she was initially inspired to stage *Troades* by what she perceived to be societal apathy towards the current conflict in Iraq.⁴⁰ She stated that *Women of Troy* is ‘[t]he most perfect play about the aftermath of war. I hoped that the production would therefore speak to the situation in Iraq now [...] and raise questions about the behaviour of victors and victims alike in a post-war environment’.⁴¹ She subsequently designed and directed the production around this notion, and positioned contemporary warfare as the supertask of her play.

Through this engagement *Women of Troy* joined a history of politically resistant productions of *Troades*. This extends back to the 1905 Royal Court production of Gilbert Murray’s translation, which was performed soon after the Boer Wars and interpreted as condemning the British role in this conflict.⁴² Furthermore, just twelve years prior to Mitchell’s production the RNT produced a *Troades* that

³⁹ Benedetti (2008: 45). When Mitchell writes about her approach, and in her directorial notes contained in the RNT archives, she does not use these terms specifically. It is clear, however, when she is referring to these Stanislavskian concepts, and thus for clarity I have used these terms throughout this article.

⁴⁰ Stated in the *Women of Troy* Platform Paper at the RNT, 10 December 2007.

⁴¹ Quoted in Shevstova and Innes (2009: 183).

⁴² Hall and Macintosh (2005: 509-511). This was the first politically ‘resistant’ production of any unadapted Greek tragedy for which we have evidence.

evoked the situation in the Balkan states and the first US invasion of Iraq.⁴³ Mitchell's Stanislavskian approach, however, meant that the contemporary political parallels were advanced in a more unusual manner, and with more consistency and rigour than prior instances. This stemmed from Mitchell's decision to tie the events of the play together with a socio-politically engaged throughaction.

Mitchell positioned the interactions and exchanges between the Greek soldiers and the Trojan prisoners of war as the throughaction of *Women of Troy*. She argued that 'The real conflict is between these Greek officials and Trojan women ... how these civil servants cope with what their masters have done. They are now on the ground having to deal with collateral damage'.⁴⁴ By focusing on the dynamics of these exchanges, rather than empathetically upon the suffering of the women, Mitchell radically departed from any audience expectations developed from witnessing earlier ideologically-engaged productions.

These prior interpretations arose from Murray's analysis of Euripides' intentions, in which he proposed that the *Troades* provided a critique of Athenian imperial policy, and in particular the sack of Melos by the Athenians in 416 BC [Th. 5.84 – 5.115].⁴⁵ Although scholars remain divided over the extent to which *Troades* provided a commentary upon these events,⁴⁶ this has become *the* interpretation of Euripides' play within the theatre and film industry, largely because of the ease with which it can be paralleled with contemporary conflicts to highlight oppressive or

⁴³ This production was directed by Annie Castledine and used Kenneth McLeish's translation. The translation can be found in McLeish (2002). For further information on the production, see Carlie (1995) and Brown (1995).

⁴⁴ Higgins (2007).

⁴⁵ See Murray (1913: 126-141) for Murray's interpretation of the Melian massacre and its relationship to the trilogy within which *Tr.* belonged.

⁴⁶ For recent work on this debate, see Erp Taalman Kip (1987) and Kuch (1998). The former argues that, taking into account the months it would take to write a play, submit it for consideration and rehearse it for performance, there was insufficient time between the sack of Melos and the autumn premiere of *Tr.* for these events to have affected the drama. The latter refutes this, and argues that a number of supplementary examples of similar behaviour during the Peloponnesian War made the subject matter of the treatment of the vanquished relevant prior to the disaster, with the Melian commentary able to be added in as a later addition closer to performance.

imperialistic regimes and sympathize with their victims. It can be seen in almost every notable production, including Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Troyennes*, which was '[e]xplicitly conceived as a protest against French brutality in Algeria',⁴⁷ and Michael Cacoyannis' 1971 film *The Trojan Women*, made during Cacoyannis' self-imposed exile during the military junta in Greece (1967 – 1974).⁴⁸

Mitchell's translator references this reading in the introduction to his version of the play, and even goes on to state that the text is subversive and also contains an implied criticism of the Sicilian invasion.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Mitchell herself is on record supporting such an interpretation; she stated:

He [Euripides] was writing in the wake of the Greeks' ruthless subjugation of the island of Melos for its refusal to side with Athens against Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. The play was triggered by his sense of moral outrage at what troops from his country had done to another country.⁵⁰

Mitchell's production does, of course, reveal some evidence of this underlying interpretation, in that by evoking the current Iraq war she hoped it would cut through the 'blocking mechanism' that saw the public ignore the effects of war upon the people of Iraq and encourage her audience to be attentive to the repercussions of war for both sides of the conflict.⁵¹ Yet by additionally investigating the role of messengers and civil servants in warfare she provides a much more complex interpretation of the material, which made it difficult for audiences to determine

⁴⁷ Hall (2007: 24).

⁴⁸ This is arguably the most iconic production of *Tr*. The socio-political dimensions of this film were made explicit in the director's note on the original release promotional brochure, where Cacoyannis states 'The need, stronger now than it had ever been before, the cry against oppression in any shape, place, or form, found its release, once again, through the words of my favourite author'. It can also be seen in the film's dedication (appearing after the credits) to '[a]ll who fearlessly oppose the oppression of man by man'. For additional scholarship on this film, see McDonald (1983: 193-259) and Bakogianni (2009).

⁴⁹ Taylor (2007: vi).

⁵⁰ Cavendish (2007). See also Higgins (2007).

⁵¹ Cavendish (2007). The *Women of Troy* programme also included an essay by Don Taylor that foregrounds the Melian allusion.

where to place their sympathies. As the remainder of my analysis will make clear, Mitchell's Stanislavskian approach allowed her production to pinpoint various subtleties in regards to character and emotion within Euripides' script and asked the audience to contemplate what is at stake for both parties during the fallout from a war.

In addition to ensuring that the production thematically departed from prior performance receptions of Euripides' *Troades*, Mitchell's notion of the supertask and throughaction also had several tangible repercussions on her opening scenes. During the pre-production period she cut Don Taylor's translation in half to clarify the intensity of the exchanges between the Greeks and Trojans, which she perceived as the key idea structure of the play.⁵² She reduced the size of her chorus to consist of just seven women, and expanded the part of Talthybius into three characters, creating the additional Greek soldiers Chrysander and Sinon in order to portray interactions that were closer to the reality of exchanges between victors—and especially their civil servants—and victims in modern warfare.⁵³ She also gave the production a contemporary setting, yet nevertheless, as previously mentioned, avoided direct analogies with the Iraq war by making the exact location somewhat atemporal. For example, Mitchell specified to the actors that the play was set in the future, while staging it in a set visually based upon the architecture of modern shipping ports. She combined this with 1940s-style costumes and music. Rather than confuse the audience, this mismatch of temporalities gave the impression that the action of the play could be happening anywhere, at anytime, and implied a cyclical notion of history with the events of the play repeating themselves in ancient Greece, World War Two, the current Iraq war, and potentially again in the future.

⁵² Stated in the *Women of Troy* Platform Paper at the RNT, 10 December 2007. **For a discussion of Mitchell's abridgement of the script, see Hardwick (2013: 22-25).**

⁵³ Euripides' script does feature mute members of Talthybius' retinue; however, Mitchell positioned these characters as active players in the drama.

Although Mitchell's Stanislavskian-based approach clearly saw her production alter the characterization and structure of Euripides' script, it simultaneously transformed the text into a recognizable contemporary world where the content and characters are relatable and emotional investment by the audience is encouraged. Just like a translation can domesticate a script into a target language in order to retain, for example, the more intangible elements of language linked to resonance and style, Mitchell's production testifies to how texts and modern theatre theories can work together to create something that is still respectful to Greek tragedy. Such a reception is more likely to reproduce the type of experiential feeling or response that one associates with these plays than a reception that fetishizes difference by being overly reverent to a fixed idea of a hermetically-sealed Euripidean meaning. Mitchell's opening tableau, for example, effectively communicated the psychological trauma that can be incurred in modern warfare by depicting a biologically realistic representation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through the nervous and fidgety manner of the women in silhouette. The elaborate backstories allow the actors and audience to comprehend the performative representation of the story as they would any modern dramatic representation. Furthermore, some of the textual departures Mitchell made from Euripides' script in her opening scene even provide additional supporting evidence for what scholars view as the prominent themes and outlook of the tragedy, as I will now demonstrate.

The most significant structural change Mitchell made to *Troades* was her removal of the divine prologue, which involves Athena requesting Poseidon's assistance to punish the Greeks for displaying hubris following their victory, and particularly for their failure to punish Ajax for his treatment of Cassandra.⁵⁴

Mitchell's opening tableau visually established the time, location, and sense of recent

⁵⁴ In *Tr.* 'Ajax dragged Cassandra off by force' [70]. This is potentially an allusion to the myth of Cassandra being raped by Ajax, having been dragged from an altar clutching a wooden image of Athena.

suffering contained in this duologue. However, the exotragic prediction by the gods, which states that the Greek fleet will be shipwrecked on their homeward journey, was absent. This alteration is indicative of the way Mitchell's Stanislavskian approach removed narrative content but shed light upon the overall emotional and psychological world of the play.⁵⁵

Poseidon's agreement colours the remainder of the play with the knowledge that the Greeks will be punished for their acts of hubris. O'Neill argues that by emphasizing the 'Known End' and revealing that the Trojan women's suffering is pointless, the audience's 'Universal Experience' transcends pathos and the overall play becomes a strong anti-war statement.⁵⁶ K. H. Lee, in his commentary on *Troades*, further argues that this is one of the central lessons of the play: '[w]antons and impudent victors will in the end be no better off than those who have been vanquished. The conquerors will pay for all acts of ὕβρις and Nemesis will finally lead them also to a position of misery and hopelessness'.⁵⁷ Throughout *Troades* the capriciousness of fate and the fickle nature of happiness is repeatedly emphasized,⁵⁸ and despite there being no *peripeteia* in the formal sense of the word, these ideas are central themes of the play. Although Mitchell omitted the narrative content relating to the notion of divine retribution for sacrilegious crimes, her interpretation of the material consistently foregrounded the overall idea of a tragic reversal of fate.

⁵⁵ The prologue is commonly removed in contemporary stagings of *Tr.*, especially following Cacoyannis' replacement of the opening duologue with a voiceover. The practice reaches back as far as Seneca's version of the play (see *Troad.*). Although audiences may have anticipated the absent prologue, productions often retain the meaning it contains by alluding to it later in the play, such as in Cassandra's scene. I will demonstrate that Mitchell always avoided referencing the eventual destruction of the Greek fleet.

⁵⁶ See O'Neill (1941, esp: 316). He further textually supports this argument by noting that the vividness of the meteorological description of the storm by Athena, and geographic description by Poseidon, means audiences will carry a lively memory of the upcoming revenge throughout the play. For an objection to this reading, see Roisman (1997: 40).

⁵⁷ Lee (1976: 79).

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Tr.* 509-10, 1203-1206. These sentiments are reminiscent of the story of Solon from Herodotus. See Hdt. 1.30ff.

This can be seen in Mitchell's black tie costuming of the Trojan women. This was determined by Mitchell's Stanislavskian pre-production hour-by-hour analysis of events, which positioned the Trojan women at a celebration party for Troy's victory prior to the play's opening. The production thus visually juxtaposed the women's former wealth with their future slavery. When abridging the script during this period Mitchell additionally chose to retain dialogue reflecting upon Troy before the city's defeat. Furthermore, the social dance that featured in the opening segment of the play and on several other occasions during the production testifies to how her Stanislavskian approach emphasized the altered status of the Trojan women, here by focusing audience attention upon the absent male partners. Although the quickstep may appear to be a nod towards the choric roots of tragedy and a way of mediating Mitchell's contemporary approach with the classical content, this is in fact a common Mitchell trope not specific to her work on Greek tragedy. Rather, the inclusion of dancing stemmed from Mitchell's specific Stanislavskian approach; her rehearsal notes describe how the dancing was justified psychologically as being a 'place to go' for the women when the events of the play became too much. **Movement director Struan Leslie further details that through the dancing '[t]he chorus makes a collective response in order to normalize and comfort themselves in the situation. The use of social dance became the signifier of something other, unspoken yet visible, and physically felt by the audience'.⁵⁹ Leslie's choreography expresses Mitchell's ideas about the play, and the disintegration of relationships it contains, in a more abstract form.⁶⁰ It is inspired by European physical theatre**

⁵⁹ Leslie (2010: 419).

⁶⁰ Stated in the Women of Troy Platform Paper at the RNT, 10 December 2007. **For further information about the use of social dance in Mitchell's productions, see Shevtsova and Innes (2009: 178) and Leslie (2010).**

and dance traditions such as that of Pina Bausch just as much, if not more so, than by classical ideas of choral formality.⁶¹

The references in the *mise-en-scène* to Troy in more prosperous times performatively realize potential meanings contained within Euripides' script regarding tragic reversals of fate, demonstrating why a performative approach, as opposed to a purely textual one, is a particularly useful way to approach the study of modern theories of performance and Greek tragedy. This can be seen in the way Mitchell's interpretation parallels scholarly investigations into *Troades*; Luschnig's argument, for example, that the play is about the vanity of victory in war and that part of the text's significance lies in its extension back to the time when Troy was prosperous as this highlights the '[u]tter waste and folly of war' corresponds to Mitchell's production.⁶² Although Mitchell's approach prevented her from communicating all of Euripides' narrative content, it clearly facilitated a representation of some of the major themes of *Troades* in a lucid and arresting manner and can work in tandem with other forms of analysis to further exemplify various readings of the text.

Examining the changes Mitchell made to Cassandra's scene provides further support for this argument.⁶³ Cassandra appears briefly in Euripides' play in a frenzied state [306-461], carrying flaming torches and singing a wedding hymn before prophesying her upcoming death and rejoicing in the fact that it will occur simultaneous with the death of Agamemnon. In Mitchell's production Cassandra entered the stage running, carrying matches, waste paper, and a container labeled 'flammable liquid' with which she lit a number of fires on stage. While the Greek soldiers attempted to restrain her, she delivered her lines. She alternated between

⁶¹ Director Helen Eastman has also attributed the growing presence of choral work in British theatre to a recent influx of European theatre techniques. See Eastman (2013: 31).

⁶² Luschnig (1971: 8).

⁶³ For scholarship on Mitchell's representation of violence in this scene, see Christianaki (2010).

singing her lines and speaking them at an unnaturally fast pace in a high-pitched voice, which resulted in them being incomprehensible. After Hecuba had removed the matches from her, Cassandra then climbed atop a table and removed her evening dress by pulling it down to her ankles. She stood, naked, delivering her prophecy in the same diction as before, while the chorus members attempted to re-dress her before the Greeks forced her offstage.

Mitchell's direction of this scene once again suppressed the narrative's focus on the characters' future fates. This was compensated for by a concentrated study of the emotional and psychological effects of warfare, seen, for example, through Mitchell's direction of Sinead Matthews' Cassandra as embodying a manic depressive psychological profile. As Mitchell was committed to showing a manic state with an accurate biology of emotions, rather than conform to the requirements of naturalistic theatre and stage the scene with clear diction, the content of Cassandra's prophecy was not communicated to the audience despite being retained almost in full. Although the mythological tradition dictates that Cassandra's contemporaries do not believe her predictions their content is important for the audience as it allows for both the transmission of the fabula of the play, and the establishment of dramatic irony. She prophesies how the Greeks' fortunes will shortly change by foretelling the ruin of the house of Atreus [364] and Odysseus' ten-year homecoming [431-443]. Cassandra's foreknowledge and its divine source positions her dramatically on a similar level to the gods in the prologue, which Papadopoulou argues means she supplements and corroborates the central meaning established by the gods of '[t]he inevitability of the retribution which is to follow *hors-de-scène* for the Greeks'.⁶⁴ Mitchell's decision to turn this dialogue into manic and indecipherable speech made Cassandra's role distinct from other interpretations. Yet the performative rendering of this scene

⁶⁴ Papadopoulou (2000: 515).

allowed numerous other meanings unrelated to the exotragic prediction to be brought to the fore via non-linguistic means.

This can initially be seen through the symbolism of Cassandra's entrance. Cassandra's arson replaces the Euripidean dialogue implying that Cassandra enters with two flaming torches [298-310]. The torches visually symbolize an Erinys,⁶⁵ a label Euripides has Cassandra attribute to herself later in the scene [457]. Representing revenge, the symbolism of an Erinys can be seen **to reinforce** the notion of divine retribution established in the beginning of Euripides' play. In performance, however, the power of this visual reinforcement is limited; even if Mitchell had retained the two flaming torches it is unlikely that the audience would have understood the symbolism of an avenging Erinys. In place of this Mitchell has created a more general image of destruction and a psychologically realistic representation of mania. This simultaneously brings to life elements of the Euripidean text, and positions Cassandra's character as representing the potential psychological effects of modern warfare. Papadopoulou supports the former concept when she argues that throughout Euripides' trilogy fire and torch are used as symbols of destruction.⁶⁶ Mitchell's directorial decision shows the visual power of this metaphorical connotation.

Analysis of the latter notion reveals how Mitchell's Stanislavskian approach not only performatively realized the sense of suffering contained within Euripides' play, but how it additionally turned the characters into contemporary figures whose conditions are understandable to modern audiences. Although Matthews' performance of a manic Cassandra was cause for contention,⁶⁷ it is representative of the reading of

⁶⁵ Kovacs (1999: 47 note 16).

⁶⁶ Papadopoulou (2000: 519).

⁶⁷ There is limited evidence within Euripides' play to support a specific reading of manic-depression. See Keen (2007) for an indicative example of the subsequent problems reviewers had with such a portrayal in performance.

madness as a repercussion of wartime trauma some see within Euripides' play.⁶⁸

Barbara Goff, for example, points out that:

Some critics contend that Cassandra has lost her mind under the pressure of the misery of Troy's fall, and that rape and enslavement have deprived her of her reason. She is deluded with 'the unclouded simplicity and happiness of one who in madness is oblivious to the real circumstances', or is in a state of frenzy.⁶⁹

The mania Matthews evinced when performing this scene is representative of such a reading. However, rather than depict the character as generically deluded, the specificity of the manic depression vocabulary and characterization fosters a deeper level of understanding from the audience. It is a profile developed by Mitchell's psychologist in line with what the psychological consequences of Cassandra's experiences during modern warfare might be. The arson, undressing, avoidance behaviour, and psychotic speech patterns featured by Matthews all contribute to a depiction of this specific form of mania. The use of nudity in this scene in particular shows the direct behavioural repercussions of Cassandra's experiences and subsequent psychological illness, while simultaneously recapturing the horrific elements of Cassandra's condition contained within the text.⁷⁰ By inviting the audience **to engage with and relate to this character more completely** Mitchell encourages spectators to pay attention to the specific ordeal Cassandra has suffered and potentially gain insight into the overall sense of suffering and wartime trauma depicted by the play, which might be missed by those who view Cassandra's madness as merely the result of Apollo's curse.

⁶⁸ Cassandra is also associated with madness in the wider mythological tradition, and particularly within Aesch. Ag. For scholarship on the way Euripides imitates Aeschylus on this matter, see Rutherford (2001).

⁶⁹ Goff (2009: 52). See also Rutherford (2001: 98).

⁷⁰ See Rutherford (2001: 96) for analysis of Cassandra's dialogue arguing that her transition from rationality to irrationality reflects a distortion of ritual whereby something familiar turns into something horrific.

Analysis of Mitchell's closing scene further reveals how her Stanislavskian-based approach transformed the Euripidean script in order to provide an examination of the contemporary emotional, psychological, and physical effects of warfare. Mitchell's denouement began when Astyanax's body was taken off stage. She retained the Euripidean material from here until the play's conclusion, when Talthybius and the Trojan women exit to board the ship bound for Greece [1251-1332] almost in full, although artistic license was still exercised in a number of ways. This was first evident in the directorial decision to destroy Troy not through fire, but through an explosion. This anachronism changed the destruction into a realistic example of modern warfare while still conveying the essential narrative information contained within this act. The scene began when the three Greek civil servants entered from stage right, after having buried Astyanax's body. Red flashing lights and sirens began whirling and sand started falling onto the stage from the roof. The men, screaming over the soundscape and aggressively pointing, ordered the women to run to the ship for immediate departure. As per the opening of the play, the number and manner of Talthybius and his retinue made these characters an imposing presence; however, the combination of this with their civilian, rather than military, clothes and their administrative function simultaneously brought out the two most common interpretations of Talthybius' character. Talthybius is one of the most problematic figures in *Troades* and scholarly interpretations of him vary widely. Gilmartin, for example, argues, in light of Hecuba calling him φίλος [267] and his admission that he shed tears for Andromache and Astyanax [1130-1131], that 'Most critics find him a sympathetic person, and credit him with tact, compassion, kindness, and humanity'.⁷¹ Conacher conversely views him as '[a] harsh, sinister figure in the *Troades*, very different from the sympathetic Talthybius of the *Hecuba*; here he is

⁷¹ Gilmartin (1970: 216).

used to represent the impersonal cruelty of the Achaeans'.⁷² Mitchell's direction of the exchanges between the Trojan women and the Greek civil servants not only brought her play closer to representing the reality of interactions in modern warfare, but also demonstrates the complexity of Euripides' characterization and reminds us that individual characters can simultaneously contain polarities that are only brought to life through nuanced performances.

The combination of the soundscape, lighting design, and the interactions between the Greeks and Trojans in this scene conveyed a sense of chaos, which was added to by a sudden explosion stage right that cut the power in the warehouse. The glass windows on the stage right wall shattered and the corrugated iron covering came loose, revealing a fire sparking beyond the wall that now lit the scene. The screaming which accompanied this explosion was in stark contrast to the formal kommos between the chorus and Hecuba that occupies this section in Euripides' script;⁷³ however, it gave the production a realistic quality and highlighted the modern parallels that ran throughout *Women of Troy*.

The scene continued when amidst this cacophony Andromache re-entered the stage space, now clothed in a long white dress. This moment contained strong surrealist overtones; not only had Andromache already departed onboard an earlier ship, but here she appeared, invisible to all other onstage characters, in a new costume and heavily pregnant. During the chaotic exodus Andromache slowly walked backwards, downstage, from stage left to right (i.e. from the port towards the destroyed city). Meanwhile, the Greeks restrained Hecuba, who was attempting to use a shard of glass from the explosion to harm herself. They forced the other female

⁷² Conacher (1967: 144).

⁷³ Lee has suggested that the way in which the conclusion of the kommos likens Troy's destruction to an earthquake [1327] may indicate the use of offstage audio effects in the ancient theatre. If this was the case, it is an interesting further example of how Mitchell's contemporary theatre techniques can assist scholars in comprehending the performativity of the extant text; however, on the basis of current evidence this can only be speculation. See Lee (1976: 282).

characters to run, upstage, in the opposite direction, towards the Greek ship. The insertion of a surreal, secondary layer of story through the ghostly presence of Andromache gave this scene a retrospective, rather than futuristic, focus, and is a sequence that I believe was directly derived from Elem Klimov's Russian anti-war film *Come and See*. The film, which the creative team watched during rehearsals and borrowed extensively from for the production's sound design,⁷⁴ ends with a montage which rewinds news-reel footage of Hitler and consequently depicts the Nazi's rise to power in reverse. Throughout this, Florian, the young partisan protagonist, fires a succession of rounds at the historical footage, only to hold fire on the final image, of Hitler as a young child in his mother's arms. This device, in both Mitchell's production and Klimov's film, suggests the possibility of an alternate reality, whilst simultaneously reminding the audience that any such endeavor is merely superficial as history cannot be undone.⁷⁵

This retrospective focus was further intensified in the final closing moments of the production. After Andromache, the Greeks and the Trojans exited the warehouse the audience was left contemplating the dark, empty space while rain leaked through the roof and splattered upon the stage. An unseen member of the chorus who had remained on stage then lit a cigarette. This image, of a sole survivor smoking among the rubble and debris, was the final tableau. It was in direct contrast to the final image in *Troades* of an empty stage, preceded by the movement of all characters towards the ocean for their journey to Greece. The closing emphasis on the ocean voyage in *Troades* evokes the prologue and reminds the audience of the upcoming destruction of the Greek fleet, whereas the presence of a single Trojan survivor mediated this idea and reinforced Mitchell's overarching focus upon prisoners of war and their handling. This intensified the retrospective focus heralded by Andromache's presence, which

⁷⁴ Stated in the *Women of Troy* Platform Paper at the RNT, 10 December 2007.

⁷⁵ Michaels (2008: 217).

invited the audience to consider the necessity of warfare and the notion of destiny. This performatively represented a psychological or mental state and demonstrates what Solga calls the privileging of the ‘how’ over the ‘why’ that is trademark of Mitchell’s ‘radical naturalism’.⁷⁶ The device forced the audience to question how the women ended up in this situation, and to what moment history would need to be rewound to avert Troy’s destruction.

Mitchell’s Stanislavskian approach clearly intervened in her interpretation of Euripides’ text in numerous ways, resulting in a production that departed extensively from the text and other performance receptions of *Troades*. It nevertheless transformed the material into a strong and insightful production that communicated its content in an arresting manner. This encouraged audience engagement on a similar level to any other modern dramatic representation of a linear, character-driven narrative, and proves, contrary to scholarly assumptions, that practitioners do employ certain forms of psychological realism when staging Greek tragedy. Furthermore, my analysis has made clear that such an approach is not only possible, but additionally can add an extra dimension to our current understanding of select themes, emotional resonances, and the characters contained within such plays. Mitchell’s production can supplement scholarly analysis into, for example, the notion of the play’s *peripeteia* or the characterization of Cassandra and Talthybius. Such works are of enormous significance to performance historians and reception scholars. Just like certain cultural contexts dictate that a theatre translation domesticate a text in order to remain respectful to the drama despite the new environment, so too can the particulars of contemporary theatre favour the application of modern theatre theories to Greek tragedy in order for a production to remain respectful to the emotional resonances, and the power of the thematic content, contained within the play. Mitchell’s broad

⁷⁶ Solga (2008: 149-150).

focus on authentically representing the sense of trauma and suffering incurred in warfare as contained within the script even performatively reflects Adrian Poole's argument that Euripides' tragedy is an exploration of 'how does one give an account of a vision of total disaster', concerned with 'analyzing, more coldly and clinically than most readers seem prepared to admit, the way in which people actually behave, values behave, words behave, in such a frontier situation'.⁷⁷ As a paradigmatic example, Katie Mitchell's *Women of Troy* indicates that a Stanislavskian-inspired production can foster a deep engagement with, and nuanced understanding of, a Euripidean play.

Utilizing Stanislavskian techniques or other theories of psychological realism is by no means the only, or necessarily the most effective, way to turn a Greek tragedy into a viable performance text. Yet Stanislavski's aim was to create theatre mimetic to real life, and it is a mistake to dismiss this as irrelevant to Greek tragedy. This article has demonstrated how a performative reading of the application of psychological realism to Greek tragedy, and particularly one which pays attention to the process of creating theatre as well as to the final staged production, is a beneficial way of approaching debates regarding the applicability of contemporary theatre theories to Greek tragedy and a methodology of particular interest for reception scholars and performance historians. Mitchell's production should be embraced as a significant work in contemporary performance reception and analyzed for what it can tell scholars about practitioners' engagements with Greek tragedy and the insights their interpretations can provide. Its departures from other receptions of the play only increase its value for scholarly analysis.

⁷⁷ Poole (1976: 259).

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